

Still Puritans?

Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
September 23, 2018

Readings

from a sermon by Rev. Peter Hobart (first minister of our First Parish in Hingham) given not long after the arrival in 1635 of these English settlers from Hingham, England (these excerpts found in *Shepherd in the Wilderness* by Edward Ripley):

Nature and nature's God smile kindly on this new Hingham and its adjacent country...

As we sow, so shall we reap. Others of our faith and kin hearing of the good works we perpetrate here will come to make common cause with us. The forest around us, the sea at our shores, the expanse of cleared fields warmed by the sun and clothed with a bountiful verdure – all these will yield us manifold by the toil of our bodies, the sweat of our brows...

Sobriety of living; steadfast adherence to the faith in the God of our fathers and prayerful petition for guidance along that faith will lead us far in this plantation to accomplish those works for which we are come together; for which we are to order our lives and those of our children. Therefore must we be a community of Christian folk, law-abiding, non-disputatious, working for common good, united in purpose...

Thousands of miles of ocean separate us from the rapacity of tyrannical rulers both of state and church; God may be worshipped as our consciences dictate, with none to say nay...

from "Old Souls, New World"
an essay by Marilynne Robinson, from her collection *What Are We Doing Here*)

I have been reading the Puritans. I confess to being drawn to orphan figures, movements, and periods. My reward is in the discovery of their frequently remarkable value and significance. It was no doubt inevitable that I would come finally to the Puritans, among the most effectively dismissed of all historically consequential movements. They are seldom mentioned except as a pernicious influence on our civilization, both early and abiding. Few grounds are offered to support this view of them...

It is curious that the desire to live a scrupulous life should be anyone else's business. And what were the transgressions of which Puritans were particularly aware? Errors in their own thinking. Hypocrisies and idolatries. They are supposed to have frowned upon the joys of life, to have had a special, dark obsession with sexuality, to have hated all things beautiful. None of this is true.

Sermon

Abner Doubleday did not invent baseball.

Rather, in the early 19th century he codified the rules of what had been variously known since colonial times as town ball or round ball – or the New England game, or the Massachusetts game.

In other words... Puritans played something like baseball.

The other team sport considered by Puritan leaders to be “lawful recreation” came to be known as the Boston game. This one, as it has evolved, we now know as football. Yes... Puritans also played football!

Indeed, Puritans were not averse to having some fun, even as at the same time they had clear ideas as to what sorts of recreation were “lawful” and what sorts of recreation were not. Notably, no gambling or sports like horse racing that tended to involve gambling. No games of dice or cards.

But “the New England game” and “the Boston game” and certain other forms of recreation were permitted, though somewhat regulated. Indeed the local militias were *required* to engage in athletic competitions.

How was it determined what sorts of recreation were “lawful” and what sorts were not? Well, we get a general clue from Massachusetts Bay Colony Governor John Winthrop. He wrote this in his diary:

When I had some time abstained from such worldly delights as my heart most desire... I grew into a great dullness and discontent which being at last perceived, I examined my heart, and finding it needful to recreate my mind with some outward recreation, I yielded unto it, and by a moderate exercise herein was much refreshed.

But here grew the mischief: In perceiving that God and mine own conscience did allow me so to do in my need, I afterwards took occasion from the benefit of Christian liberty to pretend need of recreation when there was none, and so by degrees I ensnared my heart so far in worldly delights as I cooled the graces of the spirit by them. Whereby I perceive that in all outward comforts, although God allow us the use of the things themselves, yet it must be in sobriety, and our hearts must be kept free, for he is jealous of our love.

I don't think it was easy to be a Puritan! But neither, as we've heard, was it all work and no play. And though we might not agonize about such things as did Winthrop and no doubt many others in the 17th century, don't we each strive – in similar spirit – to find balance in our lives of body, mind, and spirit? Don't we, too, recognize that, to stay with this example, recreation, exercise, and just plain fun are necessary for our overall well-being? Conversely, don't we also know that a life of nothing but play and “outward delights” becomes shallow and bereft of deeper meaning?

So, though we may not think of ourselves as “Puritanical” in the way this is usually understood, to the extent that we are striving to live balanced lives of meaning and service, it seems to me that we are living – at least to a significant extent – in the spirit of those early New England settlers we call the Puritans (which, by the way, was not a religious denomination, but rather was a name that came to be associated with these English and then New England reformers within the Church of England, the migrants making up what historians call the Great Migration from about 1620 – 1640, including of course those who settled here in the 1630s).

Well, I’m not a scholar of the Puritans or of the Great Migration, and I’m certainly not intending to offer a scholarly presentation this morning. But I am hoping to help us appreciate (whether or not we individually are descended from those early Puritans) the good that was inherent in the Puritan experiment in New England, good that as members of this First Parish in Hingham is part of our religious and spiritual legacy, good that is in fact woven into the fabric of our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition today.

For yes, over time most Unitarians and Universalists put aside certain doctrines and theological views that the early Puritans assumed were true: including such things as predestination and the Trinitarian view of God.

But you know what? Even this evolution of beliefs itself has been in the spirit of the liberty of individual conscience that was at the heart of the Puritan way.

In any case, the primary two points I want to emphasize this morning have less to do with belief and doctrine, and more to do with how we choose to live our lives – as individuals and in community. The two readings we’ve heard this morning are illustrative of what I want to say.

As for that first reading from our first minister. Peter Hobart gave the talk from which the reading was taken during the first months of the settlement of this new Hingham in 1635. And though later in his ministry he came into direct conflict with Governor Winthrop, this talk of Hobart’s is very much in the same spirit as Winthrop’s famous “city on a hill” talk, in which Winthrop said: “We shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us...”

Not at all unlike Hobart’s suggesting that their little Hingham community will be an example to others who will come and make common cause with them.

You see, these Puritans had what amounted to an almost utopian vision for a community of good, a Christian community in which each member would be cared for, in which the work of each would serve the needs of all.

Did they realize this vision? Hardly perfectly – and that would be another sermon. And yet *another* sermon would have to do with whether something called “perfection” is beside the point anyway.

In any case, it seems to me that the vision, the idea, of a good community, a community of mutual help and care, is one for which we still strive. Our Unitarian Universalist seven principles more than suggest such a vision, don’t they?: Honoring the worth and dignity of each person, together seeking spiritual growth, following democratic

principles, exercising our reason guided by conscience, seeking justice and peace, all in the context of world community and the interwoven web of all life.

And here at Old Ship we do our best – of course never perfect – but striving to put these principles, this vision, into practice through our ministries of nourishing the spirit, nurturing caring community, educating minds and hearts, serving others.

In many essential ways, still Puritans....

Next, return in your minds to this morning's second reading, from that essay by Marilynne Robinson. Just a few sentences from this reading go to the heart of her reflections about those folks we call Puritans:

It is curious that the desire to live a scrupulous life should be anyone else's business. And what were the transgressions of which Puritans were particularly aware? Errors in their own thinking. Hypocrisies and idolatries. They are supposed to have frowned upon the joys of life, to have had a special, dark obsession with sexuality, to have hated all things beautiful. None of this is true.

Her most important point here, as I read it, is not her appropriately dismissing the routine charge that Puritans frowned upon the joys and beauties of life. Rather it was that they desired to live scrupulous lives and in that spirit examined themselves for their own errors of thought, for their hypocrisies, for their idolatries.

Let me say a little about each one of those things.

First, anyone who knows anything about the Puritans knows that they valued highly the life of the mind, and in that spirit did indeed keep an eye out for their own errors of thinking. After all, one of the first things they did in New England was to found Harvard – yes, primarily at first to educate their clergy, but this was because they valued an educated clergy (which I should think is a good thing).

Second, they had an eye out for hypocrisy, their own to begin with. Were they practicing what they were preaching? Well, who can argue it's a bad thing keep that question at the fore.

Third, Robinson writes that the Puritans were concerned about their own "idolatries". We're not talking about stone idols here. To oversimplify, it has to do with priorities. Are we putting the most important things at the top of our list? The Puritans would name the most important thing God. As for us? Certainly *not* our individual selfish desires; rather our lives in service of others, of larger good – from family to begin with, to community, to the web of life itself, to whatever our chosen metaphor for the mysteries beyond our rational knowing.

Priorities. What matters most, and what matters less than we sometimes get into the habit of thinking? And how can we better live accordingly?

And all this – valuing our rational faculties, taking note of hypocrisies and idolatries – we can put under the rubric of striving to live "scrupulous" lives.

A pretty good word, "scrupulous".

Merriam-Webster's first definition is: "Having moral integrity: acting in strict regard for what is considered right or proper."

Anyone vote against that?

Well, this was the way the Puritans tried to live, according to their best lights. And it is surely the way we, in our community of faith, try to live too, isn't it.

And these days don't we need a little more "scrupulous" – ethically and intellectually – in our nation and in the world?:

When it comes to how we treat immigrants and those seeking asylum within our borders, when it comes to racism, when it comes to how we address climate change, when it comes to how we deal with charges of sexual assault, when it comes to how we choose a Supreme Court justice, when it comes to how we treat the victims of natural disaster, when it comes to the relationship our elected leaders have with the truth?

For yes, we live in challenging, even dangerous times. We need that "scrupulous" attention to how we live more than ever, which includes our desire to bring love into the world, to be a city on a hill, to own up to our faults and failings, to work together – what could be more important?

Sometimes when I'm giving a little tour of our Meeting House to visitors from afar, someone will ask if worship services are still held here, if there is still a congregation.

Then they ask what sort of church this is.

Then they might ask if it has always been Unitarian Universalist.

Well, depending on their apparent level of interest I give either the short or the longer answer. But my primary point is always that the Unitarians did not somehow steal the Meeting House from the Puritans; rather, that we evolved from the Puritans, those Puritan roots growing in various directions, including our own.

And that whatever else we might still have in common with our Puritan forebears, we, like they, take life seriously enough to seek life's meaning, to listen to the voice of conscience, and to seek ways to serve and help. Not without joy and good spirit (go Red Sox!) but at the same time with abiding seriousness of purpose.

In this spirit, absolutely still Puritan. Perhaps, in this season of our nation's life and life on earth, more importantly now than ever.

So may it be.

*

Note: Some of the background and stories about the Puritans in this sermon have been taken from *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America*, by David Hackett Fischer.